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Posted: Thursday, July 07, 2011 11:00 AM

Military drones spy on pygmy rabbits

Images taken from the retired aircraft will be used to study the animals' habitat

By [DAVE WILKINS](#)

Capital Press

Small, unmanned planes once used by U.S. soldiers to spot enemy movements in Iraq and Afghanistan have begun to fly some friendly missions across the American West.

Retired from military service, the tiny planes are no longer used to spot terrorists over the next ridge or improvised explosive devices ahead of Army caravans.

They instead are being used to spot wildlife and map habitat in places that would be difficult or impossible to reach on the ground.

A team of scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey launched one of the hand-me-down planes June 30 over sage-brush covered desert in south-central Idaho.

Images taken from the plane will be used to study pygmy rabbit habitat, supplementing information gathered from satellites.

"It gives us a little more versatility," said Jeff Sloan, a cartographer for the agency. "It gives us a little different look."

The USGS's Geographic Science Center in Denver recently inherited 17 of the tiny Raven planes from the Army.

While some of them are "pretty beaten up," they're still useful, Sloan said.

The small planes weigh about 4.5 pounds and have a wing span of about 3.5 feet.

They're equipped with conventional and infrared video cameras, on-board GPS systems and a battery that allows them to stay aloft for as long as 90 minutes.

USGS pilots controlled the plane from the ground, tracking its movement on video screens in real time and recording the flight on computer for later playback and analysis.

It was the first of several planned low-altitude flights to study pygmy rabbit habitat in the West.

The flight over sagebrush terrain north of Shoshone, Idaho, marked only the second use of the planes for wildlife purposes. The first such use was tracking sandhill cranes at a national wildlife refuge in Colorado's San Luis Valley.

"We're kind of pioneers in using this technology to map wildlife," said Jennifer Forbey of Boise State University.

Forbey and other scientists from the University of Idaho, Washington State University and the Bureau of Land Management are collaborating on the pygmy rabbit project.

The information they glean could help scientists gain a better understanding of pygmy rabbit populations across the West.

"We may find that there are way more of them than we think," she said.

Scientists' knowledge about the tiny creature and its habitat has been limited primarily to what they can observe on the ground.

"There are images we can get with these planes that we just can't get without them," Forbey said.

The pygmy rabbit is the smallest rabbit in North America, with adults weighing about 1 pound and measuring less than a foot in length.

In 2003, several environmental groups petitioned the government to list pygmy rabbits found in Idaho, Oregon, Montana, Wyoming, California, Nevada and Utah as threatened or endangered.

However, after a review of all available scientific evidence, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced last year that a listing was not warranted "at this time."

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[Dave Wilkins/Capital Press](#)

Jeff Sloan, a U.S. Geological Survey cartographer, readies a small unmanned plane for a flight over sagebrush-covered desert north of Shoshone, Idaho, June 30. Video images taken by the plane will help scientists assess pygmy rabbit habitat in the region.

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